

Scenes of Reading: Australia-Canada-Australia

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I found the idea of a ‘scene of writing’ very generative and tried to retrieve a few *mises en scène* in relation to my own obsessions over the past 45 years of teaching both in Australia and Canada. Reading some of the publications coming out of Robert Dixon’s project (e.g. Dixon and Rooney) I speculated about how fascinating it would be to track Australian scenes of reading in relation to those writers who came to Australian literary texts with knowledge of languages other than English and with cultural contexts other than Anglo-Celtic ones. After the panel session I launched a kind of Festschrift for a writer who has embodied all this for forty years: Antigone Kefala. The book captures many scenes of reading her work in numerous languages and places across the world (Karalis and Nikas). I also started speculating about the recent work by Kim Scott and many others who have been working to salvage Aboriginal languages and that here too there is an important intervention into a prevailing mono-lingualism that still seems to be the default position in Australia. Paradoxically, the work of indigenous writers and critics may make it easier to argue for more attention to be paid to that intra-cosmopolitanism multilingualism comprising the many writers and artists who have always worked within Australia—sometimes in English or an English inflected differently as well as many many other languages (Chow).

Let me draw your attention to two moments in Kim Scott’s writing. The first occurs in an essay that comments on *That Deadman Dance*, published in *Overland*:

Originally, that novel had the working title, *Rose a Wail*, a (poor) pun on a whale breaking from the ocean surface and the hint of an inarticulate cry of anguish. I wondered about the possibility of conveying a Noongar language sensibility as it emerged in English: would this mean a transformation of the language or an adjustment of the sensibility or, and probably most likely, both? The first word of the novel is an attempt by a Noongar character to render a Noongar word in English spelling; the novel concludes with the central character delivering a speech in Noongar. But even more than this sparse spattering across pages and pages of English, Noongar language influences the imagery, rhythm and characters of the novel. (59)

Scott captures exactly what a multilingual writer is able to contribute to English writing in Australia. He also describes the encounter with Noongar country and language elsewhere as tantamount to being ‘reshaped from the inside out’ (*Kayang and Me* 257).

The generalisations that follow will be outrageously simplistic but here goes. After 20 years of teaching in officially bilingual Canada, the anachronism of Australia’s apparent mono-lingualism becomes even more stark. Of course it isn’t actually monolingual but the attention paid to its multilingualism has been scant and has not been supported by funding bodies in a sustained manner. One thinks of ARC project assessment comments where researchers into literary

multilingualism produced by Australian writers are asked to include expertise from speakers in countries of origin in order to validate their project. One thinks as well of the vulnerability of relevant archives, for example, one set up to actively seek out and collect the papers and books of those from non Anglo-Celtic Australian writers which silently abandoned this aspect of the project in spite of the funding set up to sustain it.

So what did scenes of writing conceived within these parameters mean for encounters with Australian texts from the sixties onward? In some respects they comprised anxiously consulted models for assimilation. I agree completely with Lindsay Barrett's interpretation of Nino Culotta's *We're A Weird Mob*, the product of an Irish-Australian writer posing as an Italian immigrant. That it was such a best seller was undoubtedly due to the fact that it was exactly that—a normative blueprint for assimilation (Barrett). But let's fast forward to a text such as Christos Tsiolkas's *Barracuda* which captures ocker idioms with astonishing accuracy that include the nuances of ocker English inflected by varieties of other migrant dialects. What might attention to such elements yield in terms of a richer assessment of Australian English?

My teaching a course on 'AustLit' in Canada did not have much uptake in ways that teaching a course on CanLit here might fare similarly. It is far easier to teach specific writers. So in postcolonial courses it was possible to teach Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* for example and to draw attention to the ways in which Australian settler colonialism worked differently from others. The challenge was to particularise these scenes of reading for a readership that knew little of the specific dimensions, the warp and woof, the local knowledge of Australian history, and to differentiate them from the Canadian context as well as from other canonical postcolonial examples. It is also the case, as my colleague Wenche Ommundsen and others have shown, that Asian Australian writers differ in constructing scenes of reading from Asian Canadian writers—understandably a growing transnational field. Here teaching Brian Castro's work proved particularly fruitful.

Most recently I have used the framework of cosmopolitanism as rethought by critics such as Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Pheng Cheah. The term itself includes 'cosmos' and 'polis,' capturing the tensions between globalism and nationalism and the sedimentations provided by the global city. But one aspect that I was looking for in the Australian writings connected with the Scenes of Reading project is how 'race' has now become a very productive new way of reading texts: creating particular forms of legibility. There have certainly been complex debates around 'whiteness' in the Australian context but they have not necessarily moved significantly beyond familiar binaries of white and black, in which indigenous and white colonisers eternally confront each other. Critical race theorists such as Denise Ferreira da Silva have exposed within western philosophy a logic in which racialised others such as slaves and the indigenous (and we might add asylum seekers) are the constitutive elements of abjection upon which western white subjectivity is founded. Here is Ferreira da Silva's bleak comment:

Because raciality has been intrinsic to the institution of the very global (ethico-political) subjects, emancipatory projects and visions of justice grounded in (neo-) Kantian universality and self-determination will remain self-defeating because impossible goals. (*Toward a Global Idea of Race* 146)

Her work represents a trend in critical race theory that began with the ‘necropolitics’ of Achille Mbembe, illustrating that the discourse of human rights, the desire for marginalised groups to be ‘included’ are misplaced enterprises because such groups *are* constitutively included in a conceptual system that owes its very ontological existence to their racialised abjection.¹ Using critical race theory informed by this work has become particularly nuanced so that it is no longer confined to, for example, the highly influential work of African-American critics. It now includes as well the kind of work exemplified by critics and poets such as Japanese Canadian Roy Miki or Chinese Scandinavian Canadian Fred Wah. In other words, the kinds of acoustic variations captured by the accents in Tsiolkas’s work might translate into much more detailed understanding of the multi-dimensionality, the inclusion-exclusion of many groups within Australian letters. As Vilashini Cooppan reminds us, the phantasmatic contours of race bear further examination within very specific spheres of operation (123–24).

The reminder came for me when I was recently reading Maxine Beneba Clarke’s astonishing story ‘The Stilt Fishermen of Kahaluwa’ in her remarkable debut collection *Foreign Soil*. Encountering the protagonist, Tamil asylum seeker Asanka’s deliberate and desperate sewing up of his lips brought to mind two other scenes of reading.

In David Malouf’s *12 Edmonstone Street*, a series of linked autobiographical stories, there is one section, ‘A Foot in the Stream,’ where the authorial persona writes of visiting a mosaic workshop in Agra, India:

One of the boys (he might have been fifteen), using a pair of tweezers and a live coal, was engaged in setting the stones in a white paste. Suddenly, as the factory owner turned away a moment, he gave us a wild look and held up four fingers in some sort of appeal. Another demand for rupees? It looked like more than that. In a more melodramatic situation it would quite clearly have been a sign that he was being held against his will, a desperate cry for rescue.

Nothing explained itself, we passed on. But I see that wordless gesture, four tense upthrust fingers and an open mouth as an image of what I have failed to understand here, a message I am deaf to and have not received, an uncomfortable reminder of the million tiny events I have been present at that escaped my attention and which added together would make a wall of darkness in which what I have seen is the merest flash of chips in a mosaic, an eye, a hand, the fragment of a broken arch, the passage of a kingfisher’s, a bluejay’s wing. (122)

The second example relates to an essay I wrote a decade ago when, like many, I was haunted by the news reports of asylum seekers to Australia sewing up their lips and (perhaps) those of their children in an eloquent articulation of their despair. Here is how I ended that essay:

The postwar immigrants who entered Australia as displaced persons from all over the world harboured within their bodies the viruses and [metaphorically] noisy parasites (Attali 1977; Serres 1982) of languages other than English. They were feared as bearers of contamination whose linguistic pluralities registered the welts of their visible difference on the skin, even of those who looked ‘white.’ Their stammering apologies haunt the presence of those desperate contemporary refugees

cast into desert camps in apparent perpetuity who have sewn up their own lips and those of their children. (Refugees)²

The Republics of Letters collection (edited by Kirkpatrick and Dixon) includes an important essay by Jan Zwar on the impact of books during the asylum debates in the 2000s and concludes, citing Robert Manne and others, that these books did not change public opinion. I suppose I feel that while it takes decades to bring about these changes one must nonetheless persevere. My point here is that it is important to register and consider how to interpret these moments of eloquence that do not communicate easily within the grammars of legibility we currently have available to us within scenes of reading.

NOTES

¹ My thanks to Dina Al-Kassim for alerting me to the work of the ‘Afro-Pessimists.’ See http://incognegro.org/afro_pessimism.html.

²² The reference is to the following report: ‘More than 200 people at the bleak desert centre began a hunger strike eight days ago. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock ordered five children removed from the camp to protect them from having their lips sewn together like those of other children in the protest’ (Refugees).

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